
Time and Consciousness: A Phenomenological View

By Robert Osborne

Questions regarding the nature of time abound in Western philosophy. By asking them, we seek to clarify our knowledge and intuitions about an important aspect of our conscious experience. In this paper, I will critique Sydney Shoemaker's well-known argument for the objective and empirical nature of time in order to show that time is instead phenomenologically ideal, that is, that time is generated, and its reality constituted, by a certain mode of our conscious, subjective experience.

I. The Problem of Time

We often ask "Does time exist?" or "Is time real?" This question is certainly worth asking, but requires a fair bit of clarification. What do we mean by *exist* and *real*? When we pose the question "Does time exist?" what are we really asking? Without clarification, the question can on its face seem absurd – of course time exists. We use it to measure the movements of the celestial

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bodies; we depend on it to organize our days and get to places when we need to be there; we age and use it to keep track of that aging. Furthermore, we all have the vivid subjective experience of time—of earlier and later, and of past, present, and future. So it seems clear from this evidence that time does exist. But a coherent question about the existence of time surely mustn't ignore all these instances, so we must take the question to be getting at something else.¹ The question then must become "Does time exist as something more than, and outside of, our subjective experience of it?" That is, are objects, events, and beings really *in time*; is temporality an objective, inherent property of reality?

There have been numerous responses to this question in the history of philosophy, including many contemporary ones. In his famous essay "The Unreality of Time," J.M.E. McTaggart argues that time does not exist, indeed *cannot* exist as we, as Western thinkers, have often conceived it. However, it is important to note that McTaggart only argues for the *conceptual* incoherence of time—he is not claiming that our subjective *experience* of time does not exist, only that "[w]henever we perceive anything in time—which is the only way in which, in our present experience, we do perceive things—we are perceiving it more or less as it really is not."² This is a rather explicitly Kantian view, it seems, supposing that time is a necessary aspect of our experience, but that it does not apply to things as they really are in themselves. But it is important to recognize, as is obvious, that even if we take McTaggart to have proven the conceptual non-existence of time (as I do), we continue to have temporally ordered experiences. Despite the apparent logical dismissal of time, our subjective experience of it does not simply cease.³ The dynamics of this subjective experience, and what it tells us about the deeper nature of time, is what I will concern myself with in this paper.

II. Change Without Time

I will now consider Shoemaker's account of time. In his paper "Time Without Change," Shoemaker argues for the con-

cept of “empty time,” claiming that the existence of “changeless intervals” could be an empirically verifiable phenomenon. This is an important instance where time is thought to be an objective phenomenon, and its “reality” is taken to depend on its having some external manifestation beyond our minds or subjective experience.

First, let us examine Shoemaker’s thought experiment and his argument for the possibility of changeless intervals. Shoemaker asks us to imagine a world, quite different from our own, which is divided into three regions: A, B, and C. Inhabitants of the world are able to pass between the regions and can observe much of what is occurring in a neighboring region. However, periodically there occurs a “local freeze” in one of the regions, during which all processes and activity in that region cease entirely. The inhabitants of the other, non-frozen regions are able to observe a frozen region as such, but they are unable to pass into it. Shoemaker then asks us to imagine that the inhabitants of the world discover through the use of clocks in the unfrozen regions that the local freezes always last the same amount of time, namely one year. Additionally, through further measurement they discover that the freezes occur at regular intervals—every third year in region A, every fourth year in region B, and every fifth year in region C. And here we come to the crux of Shoemaker’s argument: with these intervals in mind, the inhabitants are able to induce that every *sixtieth* year there will occur a “total freeze,” in which *all three* regions will simultaneously be frozen for a year. And since the inhabitants of each region have observed freezes in the other regions, Shoemaker believes that they would have good reason to think that this total freeze does indeed occur. He admits that one could argue that, since no one would ever observe a total freeze, the freeze every sixtieth year is simply skipped and does not occur. However, in an appeal to Occam’s Razor, Shoemaker prefers his simpler theory, which supposes the occurrence of a total freeze, to the more complex explanation for the anomalous non-occurrence of a total freeze. Shoemaker then employs a modified theory of causality, “action at a temporal distance,” to explain how his total freezes

begin and end, arguing that the very passage of time itself could have causal efficacy.⁴ He thinks that these total freezes give us reason to believe in the existence of changeless intervals, and therefore in the empirical and objective nature of time.

Whether the concept of changeless intervals has any empirical content or is nonsensical depends largely on whether we conceptualize time as objective or subjective. The very fact that Shoemaker thinks that changeless intervals can occur reveals that he considers time to be an objective phenomenon. However, there is a problem with this conception. Consider that time is measured through change: the ticking of the hands of a clock, the movement of the sun, the decay of an atomic element, even the flow of our own thoughts. Change makes time intelligible. But then, how is time without change possible? I argue that it isn't. Shoemaker's term "*changeless interval*" refers to a discrete, measurable period of time that has a specific beginning and end. And yet, though the beginning of such an interval would have to be preceded by a change, Shoemaker gives the passage of time itself the power to effect change by *ending* the interval. Shoemaker here is conflating "change" and "passage of time"; he is giving the "passage of time" the causal efficacy of "change." In this way, the passage of time *becomes* change—time has not escaped change. The only reason it may seem otherwise in Shoemaker's account is that his world functions in a manner radically different from our own. So, without change, the concept of a discrete "changeless" interval becomes unintelligible, and therefore unverifiable. His three zones make it conveniently possible for unfrozen inhabitants to verify a changeless interval occurring in another zone: there is still *change* to measure time outside the changeless zone. But given that our world does not have zones, and therefore only the occurrence of a *total* freeze is conceivably possible for us, changeless intervals must be devoid of empirical content. From this we can see that Shoemaker's argument tells us nothing about the nature of our own world or the concepts concerning it.

Now, consider that we start with the other possible assumption, namely that time is *subjective*, and non-empirical.

Consider Kant's characterization of time as an *a priori* 'pure intuition' of the mind, transcendentally prior to experience, allowing us to *have* that experience at all, and through it, to make sense of the world.⁵ I assert that this conception of time is more plausible than an objectivist view, since the only real knowledge or evidence we can have about time is our own subjective, intuitive experience of it. It is important to note that, on the subjectivist view, time has no objective manifestation. Indeed, it does not follow from the propositions that change is objective, and that change is a reference point in the (subjective) measurement of time, that time *too* is objective. Were one to attribute objectivity to time on the basis of these premises, he or she would succumb to what Kant called the *Transcendental Illusion*: "And this [the transcendental illusion] leads us to regard the subjective necessity of a certain connection of our concepts for the benefit of the understanding as an objective necessity in the determination of things in themselves."⁶ Kant here is emphasizing that necessary forms of epistemology do not reflect necessary forms of ontology: just because X is necessarily *understood* as Y does not necessarily mean that X *is* Y. On this formulation, just because time is, through its empirical measurement, necessarily *understood* as objective does not necessarily mean that time *is* objective. So, under this conception, time would exist inside the mind of the conscious observer, not as a quality or property of the external world. If we subject this theory to Occam's Razor, as Shoemaker did with his theory concerning the *total freeze*, we find that it is preferable to an objectivist account, as it posits only one entity, subjective time, as opposed to two: objective time *and* our subjective experience of it. So, we can see from this view that if change were to stop, time would cease as well, since the change in our mental states and our representations, i.e., the "succession of appearances,"⁷ is *what* the pure intuition of time is arranging and apprehending.⁸ With change gone and nothing to apprehend, the pure intuition of time would be empty, and our subjective experience of time would cease.

But now let us consider a thought-experiment counter to Shoemaker's. Imagine a world metaphysically no different from

our own, but a world in which every person has mastered the art of meditation. These people have all been brought up in the art of contemplative practice, and are so adept at its use that they have the ability to completely stop the flow of their rational, thinking mental states.⁹ This can be achieved in many ways, such as by focusing on one's breathing, which would assist in the gradual emptying of one's mind. So, let us imagine then that there is a global festival held on this world every year, during which all the inhabitants enter into a meditative state at the same time, lasting for an agreed-upon interval of change, measured by (the ticking of) a clock. Once in this state, each individual is able to still the intentional functioning of his or her mind. Each would then experience a pure, objectless consciousness.¹⁰ In this state, the pure intuition of time would cease to apprehend any successions, for there would be no objects, internal or external, to represent. And with the cessation of the intuition's operation, the subjective experience of time would fade and eventually disappear.¹¹ With every inhabitant of this world in an objectless conscious state simultaneously, the intersubjective experience of temporality would vanish, and time would effectively stop.¹² And yet, outside the stilled minds of the populace, change would continue. Rivers would continue to flow, clouds would form and disperse, plants would photosynthesize, and the hearts of the meditating inhabitants would continue to beat. And yet all this would occur outside of time. Change without time.

But how is awareness, i.e., evidence, of an objectless conscious state possible without time or intentionality as a frame of reference? That is, how are the meditators to verify, upon reflection, that they did indeed experience an a-temporal state, during which change nevertheless continued? We may look to consciousness considerations within the study of the philosophy of mind to address these questions. In his book *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, Robert K. C. Forman examines the nature of what he calls the *pure consciousness event* (PCE).¹³ He argues from his theory of *knowledge-by-identity* that such an objectless conscious state as the PCE is an instance of non-intentional experience. Knowledge-by-identity is formed when the subject knows some-

thing by virtue of *being* it.¹⁴ When one is in contact with one's own consciousness, the subject is not distinct from the object: pure consciousness experiences *itself*—subject and object collapse in on one another. As such, knowledge-by-identity is a reflexive or self-referential form of knowing.¹⁵ Forman underlines the *sui generis* nature of knowledge-by-identity:

To assume that we know our own consciousness in the same way we know another person, an apple, or even facets of our own personality would be to commit the fallacy of the displaced object. Our familiarity with our own consciousness is so intimate, so without seams, that we have no way of teasing out its constituent parts. In knowing it we just have an immediate sense of it and of its continuity through what we know (intellectually) as past and present.¹⁶ This intimate acquaintance— what I have called “knowledge-by-identity”—should be distinguished in epistemological structure from all other knowledge.¹⁷

As my thought-experiment shows, the mind's ability to alter its own conscious states would allow the meditating inhabitants to experience an objectless state of which they could be fully aware. The awareness that a consciousness has of itself is not temporally constructed; “[r]ather, awareness per se simply ties past and present together as one single continuous awareness. That is, being aware transcends time.”¹⁸ The concept of time without change as presented by Shoemaker falls short in both its objective and subjective interpretations, and his thought-experiment fails through incommensurability. Nevertheless, Shoemaker was correct in suggesting that time and change are not necessarily coextensive. Through a reexamination of the concepts of “time” and “change,” and their relation to pure consciousness, it seems clear that what is possible is not time without change, but rather change without time.

III. Conclusion

I have endeavored to show that time is phenomenologically ideal. From my examination of Shoemaker's argument, we can see that time is not a typical empirical concept, and that it is unintelligible without change. And through my thought-experiment, it has been shown that change without time is possible, due to the nature of pure consciousness. From this, it can be concluded that time is not an independently existing entity or feature of the external world, but rather a phenomenological artifact arising from a particular mode of subjective experience. Time is a function of rational consciousness. It may be argued, contra this line of reasoning, that time could still be an objective feature of the world, that when we alter our consciousness and cease the apprehension of successions, we are simply cutting ourselves off from observing the time inherent in the world (and that this is why our experience of time stops). It may be replied that the fact that we continue to have an experience of time when we close our eyes means that time is *not* something inherent in the external world, and that the flow of our mental states constitutes a succession that gives rise to subjective time.¹⁹ Furthermore, the observation that the subjective experience of time ceases altogether when we remove the succession of our mental states shows that time is not something inherent in the mental world, since we are always observing our own consciousness, though not always as a succession. Rather, time emerges from a certain *mode* of experience, one where things are experienced *in* a certain way (as successions), and therefore as *being* a certain way, namely temporal. And as such, in response to our orienting question, time arises from the form of one type of our subjective experience, and it does not exist as *something* more than or outside of it. Time is not a *thing* to be experienced, but rather a *way* of experiencing *things*.

Notes

1. This may seem entirely obvious, but it is of prime importance in philosophy to clarify what it is we are discussing. I do not doubt that much time and effort has been wasted in debate due to the failure to recognize this distinction.
2. J.M.E. McTaggart, "The Unreality of Time," in *The Philosophy of Time*, eds. Robin Le Poidevin and Murray MacBeath, Oxford Readings in Philosophy (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993), 34.
3. This may suggest that we are at least not *purely* rational beings, and that experience is not subject to all the vagaries of reason.
4. Sydney Shoemaker, "Time Without Change," in *The Philosophy of Time*, eds. Robin Le Poidevin and Murray MacBeath, Oxford Readings in Philosophy (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993), 75-76.
5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Marcus Weigelt (1781; London: Penguin Books, 2007), A 31 = B 46.
6. *Ibid.*, A 297 = B 353.
7. *Ibid.*, A 31 = B 46.
8. I would like, here, to note that the pure intuition of time is importantly *prior* to the experience of change and succession, and so does not *arise* from it, but rather makes it possible as such. I do not claim that the pure intuition itself would cease to be altogether; I only suggest that without the content supplied by the apprehension of change and succession, the pure intuition of time would be empty and our subjective intuitive experience of time would cease.
9. This proposition is really not so unbelievable, certainly not as fantastical as Shoemaker's thought experiment. Hundreds of millions of people have been making contemplative practice a foundational aspect of their worldview for millennia. That the mind is capable of acts and states far different from the everyday discursive thinking mode is certain, and the expansion of this ability has been the basis for religious and mystical beliefs for longer than Western civilization has existed. The naïve belief that the "I" and consciousness ceases to be when rational

thought stops surely descends from outdated Cartesian rationalism. Indeed, people far less proficient in meditation than Zen masters and Yogis are able to reach such a state. I myself have experienced it, if only for a few moments. I have experienced meditation periods of half an hour that have seemed to pass in five minutes. We can think of this, in Kantian terms, as the pure intuition of time breaking down in the absence of thoughts and objects to represent as successions.

10. This opposes the well-known views of Brentano and Husserl, and the popular view in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind, that all conscious mental states are necessarily directed at an object (the *intentional object*).

11. See n. 7.

12. Let us imagine, for the sake of the thought-experiment, that there are no animals or any other sentient creatures on the planet for whose subjective experience of time we must account.

13. Robert K. C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 59. Forman is retired Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Hunter College and founder of the peer-reviewed *Journal of Consciousness Studies*.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Parentheses Forman's.

17. Forman, 127.

18. Ibid., 122.

19. It is also important to consider the fact that there are meditative states of altered consciousness in which the individual continues to move and observe the external world visually, but is so adept at controlling their mental state that they also have no subjective experience of time. Those capable of such states are considerably rare, but they likewise demonstrate that time cannot be an objective feature of the external world.

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